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Boundaries, Borders, and Imperial Control: Opium and the Imperial Project in Southeast Asia, 1890-1930

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article explore le défi paradoxal qui tenaille la puissance de l'État colonial en expansion du fait des tentatives des gouvernements coloniaux de l'Asie du sud-est de réglementer de plus près l'importation, la vente et l'utilisation d'opium. À la fin du XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e siècle, ces gouvernements sont intervenus pour solidifier la tutelle de leur territoire tout en commençant à instaurer des programmes liés à l'idéologie de mission civilisatrice en cours. L'industrie de l'opium représentait un moyen d'affirmer les compétences des États en développement dans ces deux domaines. Les gouvernements coloniaux ont ainsi établi des monopoles d'État non seulement sur l'importation mais aussi sur la vente de l'opium, avec l'objectif annoncé de réduire les dangers de l'opium pour les sujets de la colonie. Ils ont aussi renforcé les pouvoirs de surveillance des frontières partout où le stupéfiant passait en contrebande. Dans ces deux secteurs d'activité, cependant, la résistance et l'infraction aux politiques coloniales sur l'opium ont révélé la faiblesse des colonies en matière d'application, malgré la hausse du financement, l'augmentation des corps policiers et de contrôle frontalier, ainsi que la coopération intercoloniale.

Boundaries, Borders, and Imperial Control: Opium and the Imperial Project in Southeast Asia, 1890-1930*

ANNE L. FOSTER

Abstract

This essay explores the paradoxical challenge posed to expanding colonial state power by the attempt of colonial governments in Southeast Asia to more closely regulate opium import, sale and use. These governments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries worked to solidify their control over the full extent of their territory at the same time they began to implement programs associated with the civilizing mission ideology. Opium provided a means to demonstrate developing state capacity in both these areas. Colonial governments instituted state monopolies over not only importation but also sale of opium, with one stated goal to minimize opium's harm to colonial subjects. They also enhanced state power to police borders where opium entered the country illicitly. In both these areas, however, resistance to and evasion of colonial opium policies revealed colonial states had too little power to enforce them despite increased funding, larger police and border control units, and cross-colony cooperation.

Résumé

Cet article explore le défi paradoxal qui tenaille la puissance de l'État colonial en expansion du fait des tentatives des gouvernements coloniaux de l'Asie du sud-est de réglementer de plus près l'importation, la vente et l'utilisation d'opium. À la fin du XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e siècle, ces gouvernements sont intervenus pour solidifier la tutelle de leur territoire tout en commençant à instaurer des programmes liés à l'idéologie de mission civilisatrice en cours. L'industrie de l'opium représentait un moyen d'affirmer les compétences des États en développement dans ces deux domaines. Les gouvernements coloniaux ont ainsi établi des monopoles d'État non seulement sur l'importation mais aussi sur la vente de l'opium, avec l'objectif annoncé de réduire les dangers de

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l'opium pour les sujets de la colonie. Ils ont aussi renforcé les pouvoirs de surveillance des frontières partout où le stupéfiant passait en contrebande. Dans ces deux secteurs d'activité, cependant, la résistance et l'infraction aux politiques coloniales sur l'opium ont révélé la faiblesse des colonies en matière d'application, malgré la hausse du financement, l'augmentation des corps policiers et de contrôle frontalier, ainsi que la coopération intercoloniale.

In the 1890s, colonial governments in Southeast Asia began to change their policies for regulation and control over opium sales and consumption in the region. Prior to that time, nearly all legal opium in Southeast Asia was imported through a government monopoly, and the right to retail sale in a particular geographical region was auctioned to the highest bidder in what was called the opium farm system. This method of opium control was highly profitable and easy to administer. Although rampant smuggling undercut colonial and, sometimes, opium farmer profits, the opium farm system fit with how Europeans governed in Southeast Asia until the nineteenth century. Their primary focus was revenue and raw material extraction; if they could achieve those satisfactorily with minimal disturbance to indigenous political arrangements, Europeans were pleased. During the nineteenth century, however, changing conceptions of state power and inter-imperial conflict meant Europeans insisted on more explicit recognition of their political rights in defined territorial regions. By the late nineteenth century, Europeans, joined in the 1890s by Americans, justified their colonial rule with reference to the civilizing mission. These two changes resulted in colonial governments switching to government monopoly over both import and sale of opium. They wanted to maximize profit; to demonstrate control of boundaries by regulating the movement of goods; to claim that their regulation of opium sales benefitted local populations; and to hold themselves up as a model to other colonial governments in their ability to formulate, implement, and enforce opium policies. These desires sometimes conflicted with each other, but more often they faced challenges from smugglers, corruption, evasion, and insufficient state resources. The ways in which colonial governments attempted to regulate opium reveals the ambition of an increasingly observant and controlling colonial state, as well as the persistence of traditional power structures, and the challenges posed by other states, criminal elements, and ordinary people.

Accommodation and Conflict in Conceptions of the State

Europeans brought with them on their imperial missions throughout the world a belief that political power was demonstrated by the ability to draw a line on a map, and then to control the people and territory on "their" side of that line, as

BOUNDARIES, BORDERS, AND IMPERIAL CONTROL:
OPIUM AND THE IMPERIAL PROJECT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1890–1930

well as the peoples and goods which crossed that line. Indigenous peoples often had different ideas about the meanings of political power and control. These differences in understanding sometimes facilitated initial European settlement in an area: Europeans believed they had conquered territory which indigenous peoples sometimes simply allowed them to move onto because the European presence threatened nothing important to their conceptions of political power. These different understandings prompted conflict as well, when each group attempted to exercise what its members believed to be its rights, and clashed over control of territory or people. Scholars have been fascinated by the accommodation, conflict, acculturation, and negotiation among groups in these frontier or borderland areas, especially in the years of initial contact and throughout the process of drawing the boundaries and imposing European modes of thought.¹

In Southeast Asia, the differences in ways political power was imagined were as stark as anywhere in the world. Southeast Asian polities typically centred around the person of the ruler, who demonstrated his power by the number of people who owed him allegiance rather than by lines he drew on a map. People at the outer edges of a king's power might owe allegiance to multiple rulers, or to none at all, something most difficult for Europeans to comprehend. Europeans initially behaved in ways which looked familiar to many Southeast Asians, establishing trading posts and working to control trade and resources. As European power grew, however, Europeans began to insist on their own conceptions of political power and to demand that maps be drawn to indicate what was, for example, "British Malaya" or "Siam." By the late nineteenth century, the maps had been drawn, élite Southeast Asians had become familiar with, if not always accepting of, European modes of organizing sovereignty, and states in the region worked to control goods and peoples crossing the established borders between one state and the next.²

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- 1 For Southeast Asia, the indispensable source is Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), esp. chaps. 3–4. A lively scholarship on frontiers and borders in North America exists. The classic text is Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), but also see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (June 1999): 813–41, as well as the responses by Evan Haefeli, Christopher Ebert Schmidt-Nowara, John R. Wunder, and Pekka Hämäläinen in *American Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (October 1999): 1221–39. This essay owes intellectual debt to the vast scholarship on borderlands and frontiers, but is primarily interested in how government officials imagined and acted on their ideas of political power within boundaries they believed had been established. The terms boundary and border are used somewhat interchangeably to indicate the line separating one internationally recognized governmental unit (especially a nation-state or colony) from another.
 - 2 Use of the male pronoun for the ruler is appropriate since nearly all rulers were men. Thongchai, esp. chap. 6, and Eric Taggiacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 28–52.

Drawing borders and convincing indigenous élites to accept them had been difficult. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European colonial governments also increasingly wanted to regulate the movement of goods and peoples across borders, and the economic and sometimes moral behaviours of people within the borders of their territories. By the late nineteenth century, a key justification for the exertion of colonial authority was that the colonial state observed behaviour for the purpose of both categorizing and improving it.³ This justification was a double-edged sword, however. It offered the colonial state a rationale for a vast expansion of its power and ability to intervene coercively in the lives of its subjects. But, simultaneously, colonial states could be judged by how well they were able to control peoples. Getting people to adopt reforms and new practices, however, proved difficult. Scholars have explored the ways in which these new conceptions of state power were tested in many realms, including education, labour laws, missionary activities, and infrastructure development.⁴ Opium policy provides a way to explore how this new state power needed to operate both inside the drawn boundaries of a colony to monitor and regulate people's behavior, as well as across drawn boundaries, to interdict smugglers and fend off challenges from imperial rivals.

Control at the Heart of Empire

Although Europeans worked to impose authority consistently throughout their territories in Southeast Asia, they assumed that they had more control in the long and closely held colonial cities: Singapore for the British, Batavia for the Dutch, and Saigon for the French. Recently, scholars have examined the ways in which the gaze of the colonial state intensified in colonial cities in the early twentieth century. Rudolf Mrázek evokes the power of electric light, and optics, when he quotes a Dutch newspaper complaining about indigenous employees: "Two eyes are often not enough to watch them." Dutch officials and employers used technology and artificial light to give themselves more observational power. Ann Stoler has examined the colonial state's insistence on intruding into the intimate lives of those in the colonies. Men and women in intimate relationships across racial categories caused problems, not least that they produced children. By the late nineteenth century, the state began to insist that their offspring be properly classified, so they did not fall into the wrong category or

3 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 9–52; Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 103–11; Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–11.

4 The essays in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) provide a useful overview.

worse, no category at all.⁵ Unlike electric lights or governmental efforts to regulate intimate lives, attempts to observe and thereby control smugglers had a long history in these colonial cities.

Smuggling is, however, an act by its nature not fully observable and the apparent magnitude of smuggling in the cities where colonial authority was supposed to be strongest disturbed colonial officials, who poured resources into discovering smugglers' methods. Colonial and foreign ministry officials demanded reports from local authorities about how much opium was smuggled, by what methods, and by whom. The information was often shared with consular officials, who reported back to their respective governments. These reports reveal shifting, subtle, and ingenious smuggling methods. One commonly mentioned method was to store opium inside life belts or life boats on ships. Life boats were ubiquitous, rarely inspected when ships arrived in port, and generally untouched by passengers, but accessible to all.⁶ A more traditional smuggler might push all the opium tins (placed in cloth bags) overboard shortly before reaching port, then send a small boat out in the night to haul them in and land surreptitiously.⁷ Those methods were often effective, but smugglers also used such creative tactics as placing opium in hollowed out fresh vegetables, in the soil of houseplants brought in as part of personal effects, in hollowed out brooms, and in the false centres of carved wall panels. These methods were used primarily by petty smugglers. Smugglers for major syndicates either landed shipments directly at unguarded nearby beaches, or dumped tins (often petroleum tins) overboard into the ocean and retrieved them later.⁸

These reports are about smuggling in the main ports of colonial Southeast Asia, where customs inspections took place, where the colonial government had an important presence, and where lawbreakers presumably had the most chance of getting caught. Colonial officials knew only about what they intercepted, not much about how much opium was successfully smuggled. In some

5 Mrázek, 103; Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 23–6.

6 For one example, see Netherlands National Archives (hereafter NNA), Verbaal 7-Mei-1925-J6 geheim, 2.10.36.51 inv. 265, Vertegenwoordiger van Nederland in de Raadgevende Opiumcommissie van den Volkenbond (Wettum), report on opium smuggling, 5/5/1925.

7 This method was described in a report from the Philippines in 1927. See United States National Archives (hereafter USNA), 811b.114 Narcotics/74, Central Files (hereafter CF), Record Group (hereafter RG) 59, L.R. Sweet (Philippine Constabulary) to Governor General of the Philippines, 4 August 1927.

8 Ibid., 846d.114 Narcotics/92, CF, RG59, US Consul (Thomas McEnelly) in Singapore to USDOS, 1 December 1936; ibid., 846d.114 Narcotics/148, CF, RG59, McEnelly to USDOS, 9 April 1938.

ways, colonial officials were resigned to the fact that opium could be so easily hidden, meaning the struggle against smuggling would be never ending. But as expectations about colonial authority grew in the early twentieth century, the ineffectiveness of the colonial gaze in this area became more disturbing. The only answer was to devote more resources and to work collaboratively within and across colonial governments, but control remained elusive. Increased seizures of smuggled opium might indicate greater knowledge of smuggling networks and methods, or it might mean smugglers had increased their volume. Decreased seizures might mean smugglers had become discouraged from continuing their efforts, or might mean that smuggling was more successful. There was no direct way to tell whether the exertion of colonial authority was succeeding.⁹

As colonial officials studied smugglers' methods, their concern also grew about the levels of sophisticated organization needed to get raw opium from farmers in India, Persia, or China to smokers in Burma, Singapore, Java, Manila, or Saigon. These transnational networks were highly developed and functioned easily across colonial boundaries. Smuggling rings seemed, to colonial authorities, to have contacts at all levels of society, and yet to be beyond the reach of colonial authority. In part, colonial officials found it difficult to infiltrate smuggling rings because they assumed always that ethnic Chinese organized the smuggling. Reports by colonial officials asserted that smugglers were Chinese, that smuggling rings encompassed China, Hong Kong, or Macao, and that there were a large number of ultimate destinations (ports throughout Southeast Asia, but also including Hawaii and the west coast of the United States).¹⁰ Very few reports mention smugglers of other ethnicities, with the minor exceptions of indigenous people who were used as couriers or Europeans smuggling opium for what was assumed to be their own personal consumption.

These assertions required no demonstration of proof beyond the fact that opium seized bore Chinese marks and labels, or came from Chinese (or Chinese-crewed) ships, or from Chinese people. Rather, these reports referred to the known tendency of Chinese to smuggle, to the lengths to which Chinese would go to get access to opium, and to the fact that most arrests for smuggling were of Chinese people. Only when the ethnicity of smugglers was different did colonial officials attempt to explain why a person of that ethnicity might engage in smuggling, as when an American report noted that Chinese

9 Decreases in available opium in the colony would indicate success, but it was also difficult to state confidently that the amount of available opium had either decreased or increased.

10 For an example, see League of Nations Archives, Geneva, Switzerland (hereafter LONA), document 7834, dossier 3809, carton 4904, "Sub-committee on Seizures," (confidential) 4 November 1933.

BOUNDARIES, BORDERS, AND IMPERIAL CONTROL:
OPIUM AND THE IMPERIAL PROJECT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1890–1930

smuggling organizations often used Filipinos as the distributors.¹¹ Reported arrests were primarily of ethnic Chinese people, but whether these figures represented crude racial profiling or an accurate reflection of the ethnicity of smugglers, is impossible to discover. Arrest statistics reveal only who was caught, and allow little to be said about who might actually have been smuggling.

Colonial officials believed, however, that most large scale smuggling was organized by networks of ethnic Chinese and were frustrated by their inability to use state power to impose supervision and control over them. The Chinese smuggling rings were transnational, with familial and business relationships stretching across all of Asia at least, and drawing on long histories.¹² Ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were largely impenetrable by European and American colonial officials, who rarely spoke the appropriate languages, and even when they did, were obvious outsiders. Without knowledge of the internal dynamics of the networks, there was no way to control these communities. Under the previous opium farm system, the lack of knowledge and control had been acceptable to officials so long as addiction rates were not too high and profits were sufficiently high. The government monopolies justified themselves in part by their ability to control smuggling, so when the ethnic Chinese smuggling rings persisted despite the expanded efforts of colonial officials, it was more than embarrassing. In this way, continued smuggling challenged the regulatory approach adopted by colonial officials.

Ethnic Chinese opium smugglers did not openly challenge the political order, which European and American colonial governments worked to impose; indeed they relied on it. But in the act of smuggling, an act requiring transnational and secret organization of trade and distribution of an illicit commodity, they called into question colonial government claims that these governments knew and controlled their subjects. For officials, this challenge was unsettling, as unsettling as the growing threats from nationalists and communists, and it prompted a similar response. As they did in combatting political challenges, colonial officials shared secret information and allowed their police to cooperate by operating near or even in each others' territories, to exchange techniques, and to establish personal rela-

11 USNA, 811b.114 Narcotics/74¹/₃, CF, RG59, L.R. Sweet (Philippine Constabulary) to Governor General of Philippines, 4 August 1927, for comments about Filipinos and Chinese. For general comments about Chinese involvement see, for example, NNA, A194/32, inventaris 1464, 2.05.21, Algemeene Rijksarchief, The Hague, the Netherlands, W.J. Oudendijk (Dutch Minister in China) to Dutch Foreign Minister, 3 December 1919; and British National Archives (hereafter BNA), CO54/882/10, L.S. Amery (Secretary of State for the Colonies) to Austin Chamberlain (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs), 21 December 1926.

12 For an overview of Chinese importance in the legal opium trade in Asia, see Carl A. Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade, 1750–1950* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 118–59.

tionships.¹³ In 1925, for instance, the British government quickly informed the United States government when it discovered “a considerable traffic in opium ... between Amoy and Hong Kong and the United States possessions of the Philippines and Honolulu.” The British memo noted that the American Consul in Hong Kong had been given the names of the Chinese firms in Manila, Cebu, and Honolulu that were involved.¹⁴ Later that summer, additional information on seizures, this time in Singapore, was shared by the British authorities with the American Consul in Amoy. The British Consul noted that he was working closely with the American Consul, but that it was difficult to know precisely where the opium had come from: “Definite proof is extremely difficult to obtain, the methods adopted impossible to unravel and it would require a special, expert staff doing nothing else to assist the Customs to take any measure in suppressing the export.”¹⁵ The combination of certainty about some information, such as the firms involved, and the frustration about the inability to learn other information despite devoting substantial resources to investigating the smuggling, suggests the difficulties colonial governments faced in merely observing the opium traffic. During the 1920s and 1930s, the amount of information available to government officials increased dramatically, but they had no certainty that they knew about all or even most smuggling going on in their territories.

Control at the Edges of Empire

Part of the imperial task in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was attempting to bring the exercise of political authority into congruence with the boundary lines drawn on the map. Despite European and American ideology that political power extended throughout territories they could legitimately claim, in fact colonial rule rested very lightly on many parts of Southeast Asia until well into the twentieth century. Some areas, such as along the mountainous borders in parts of mainland Southeast Asia, remained in dispute, with the lines appearing dotted even on printed maps.¹⁶ In other areas, the lines existed,

13 For discussion of the political collaboration among Southeast Asian colonial powers, see Anne L. Foster, *Projections of Power: US and European Entanglements in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), especially chap. 2. For agreements to share information about opium smugglers, see BNA, FO115/2845, Charles Evans Hughes (US Secretary of State) to Henry Getty Chilton (US charge d'affaires in Great Britain), 7 August 1923; and NNA, Mailrapport 316x/24, Verbaal 16-April-1925, 67, inventaris 2731, 2.10.36.04, Government Secretary to All Dutch Consuls in Asia, 25 April 1924.

14 USNA, 811b.114 Narcotics/18, CF, RG 59, British Embassy in United States to United States Secretary of State, 27 June 1923.

15 Ibid., 811b.114 Narcotics/28, CF, RG 59, W.H. Hewlett (British Consul at Amoy) to Governor of Hong Kong, 25 August 1925; and ibid., Leroy Webber (US Consul at Amoy) to US Department of State, 26 August 1925.

16 Thomas E. McGrath, “A Warlord Frontier: The Yunnan-Burma Border Dispute, 1910–1937,” *Proceedings of the Ohio Academy of History* (2003): 7–30.

but state authority only extended to certain kinds of activities.

British North Borneo is a classic case. The territory was not even a full-fledged colony, but rather a British protectorate technically ruled and operated by a British company under royal charter since 1882. Acquired primarily to deny it to other European powers, British North Borneo had tenuous connections to the empire. British population and governmental centres on the Malayan peninsula viewed British North Borneo as a place tucked away on the far side of the massive island of Borneo. Physically, it is much closer to the Philippines than to Malaya, but its legal status, connected to Britain, meant that London officials during the 1910s and 1920s had to spend substantial time and effort responding to American accusations that smugglers found British North Borneo a haven.

As closely as the British and American authorities appeared to have cooperated to combat the smugglers in Amoy or Singapore, whose product was destined for Manila and Honolulu, they clashed in North Borneo, where their territories were side by side, but where the authority of each was at its furthest edge. British officials believed Americans, and even more problematic, Filipinos, overstepped their authority to combat smugglers in or near North Borneo. Americans accused the British of not taking the opium problem seriously. This clash at the edges of empire prompted action in imperial capitals.

British North Borneo was certainly at the edge of empire. To be sure, a steady flow of jungle products and, by the second decade of the twentieth century, rubber profited British investors. And the many good ports on the coast meant both international and coastal trade flourished. But British administration rested lightly on North Borneo. Local “chiefs” administered day-to-day and local policies; a British governor and the president of the British North Borneo Company managed economic development. Administration of the territory took only 60 British officials, and approximately 350 Europeans lived in North Borneo in 1931. It was remote, geographically and sentimentally, from most British. As political scientist George Kahin wrote, “Public opinion in Britain was little concerned about what went on in the north-east corner of Borneo.”¹⁷

American officials were concerned, however, since they believed opium smugglers were purchasing opium in British North Borneo and smuggling it in small boats, whether fishing or trading vessels, from smaller ports in North Borneo to the many islands of the nearby Philippines. This strategy worked for smugglers throughout island Southeast Asia. Official ports of entry, where duty might have to be paid and cargoes might have to be inspected, were easily bypassed in favour of small harbours with no official presence. Once the small cargo was landed, it was relatively easy to move it again within a colony, undetected.

17 George McT. Kahin, “The State of North Borneo, 1881–1946,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (November 1947): 47, 50, 54; John S. Galbraith, “The Chartering of the British North Borneo Company,” *The Journal of British Studies* 4, no. 2 (May 1965): 112–13.

Despite the small British official presence in North Borneo, the issue of opium smuggling prompted those officials to master details about seizures and methods of control. In response to American protests, British officials reported they had changed shipping regulations to inhibit smuggling. From that point on, they would refuse clearance papers to any boats under 30 tons bound for the Philippines. These usually would be “native” boats, believed most likely to smuggle opium. The British even changed the form in which opium was sold, from 1 tahl pots (a small ball which produced several pipes of opium) to packets, which contained just about one pipe’s worth. Smugglers had more difficulty making a profit from these packets.¹⁸ Americans in the Philippines complained to the Colonial Office in London about the “enormous amount of opium smuggled into the Philippines from North Borneo,” and provided details about seven seized ships carrying opium. From North Borneo, officials responded somewhat testily that they had not received this information from the Philippines, that the amounts were relatively small, and that “the revenue cutters employed by the Philippine Government — manned and officered by Philipinos — were themselves accomplices in the nefarious practices” in the past.¹⁹

Smugglers at the edge of empire had long existed, mostly attracting little or no attention in imperial capitals. But these smugglers, far from London, prompted official investigations, exchanges of information at the highest levels within the Colonial and Foreign Offices, and detailed interventions in policy. A certain amount of opium smuggling had been tolerated when its primary harm was to the profits of the opium farmers. But by the 1920s, opium smugglers challenged the profits of the government opium monopoly and the belief of colonial officials that they were in control of the colonies. Having to report extensive smuggling in such international venues as the Opium Advisory Committee at the League of Nations could be embarrassing. The British North Borneo case prompted the Foreign Office to express its concern to the Colonial Office in March 1921, noting that the “opium question” would receive “attention” at the upcoming League of Nations meeting, and that British members of the Opium Advisory Committee did not want “to find themselves in the position of defending any doubtful cases which might seem to savour of British official condonation of illicit traffic in opium.”²⁰ About a month later, an urgent cable arrived in North Borneo from London, predicting that Americans at the Opium Advisory Committee would claim that smugglers in North Borneo were supplied partly from government stocks and “not wholly by shops.” Disproving

18 BNA, CO874/914 1913–1921, Minute by W.H.W., 20 August 1920, file Smuggling of Opium, North Borneo.

19 Ibid., Secretary (British North Borneo) to Under Secretary, Colonial Office (London), 13 April 1921.

20 Ibid., V. Wellesley (Foreign Office) to Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, 23 March 1921.

this claim would require proof of control over all opium for the last three years, for which “stocktaking will be necessary.”²¹ Regulating the opium trade meant colonial officials had to increase their knowledge about, and oversight of, other activities in the colonies. Attempts to exert monopoly control over opium at the edges of empire led to discovery of new smuggling-trading networks, thus prompting yet more controls, in an effort to demonstrate that the British were in charge throughout their territory.

Opium and Corruption

A need to police smuggling was one result of increased government responsibility for opium sales; another result was that there were more opportunities for government officials to be corrupted. The demand for illicit opium was high, providing each government official involved in the process, from importation to processing to wholesale distribution to retail sales, a means to gain illegal funds. Corrupt officials had existed under the farm system, but once colonial governments operated the opium monopolies, not only was the potential scope of corruption vastly expanded, but the presence of corrupt officials called into question the superiority of colonial governance. Colonial governments claimed that corruption was the result of a few dishonest officials, but the corruption which was rife in the opium monopolies also meant that these systems failed to extend the benefits of what were intended to be good policies to all colonial subjects.

Colonial governments instituted systems which had potential to transparently regulate the distribution of opium and work toward their stated goal of reducing opium consumption.²² The Dutch government, for example, created the Opium Regie, a highly elaborate government bureaucracy intended to regulate imports, standardize opium production for predictable and controllable retail sale, register legitimate opium users, and provide tutelary experience for Indonesians who would make up the bulk of the employees of the Regie. The Opium Regie had an imposing appearance, but salaries were low, prestige even lower, and corruption rampant. Prepared opium tubes “leaked,” opium registers were falsified, and statistics could not always be trusted.²³ The

21 Ibid., Ridgeway to Governor North Borneo, 12 April 1921.

22 In 1909, all colonial governments in Southeast Asia had publicly declared their intention to move to the “gradual suppression” of non-medicinal opium consumption at the Shanghai Opium Commission meeting. The United States had prohibited opium sales in the Philippines. The seriousness of European governments’ commitments to suppression is debatable, however. See Anne L. Foster, “Prohibition as Superiority: Policing Opium in South-East Asia, 1898–1925,” *The International History Review* 22, no. 2 (June 2000): esp. 264–7.

23 Ewald Vanvugt, *Wettig Opium: 350 Jaar Nederlandse Opiumhandel in de Indische Archipel* (Haarlem: Onze Tijd, 1985), 341–51; B.N. van der Velden, *De Opiumregie in Nederlands-Indie* (Batavia, 1937), 75–82.

French and British bureaucracies were less elaborate, but faced similar problems. As one case in northern Vietnam demonstrates, corruption could spread broadly.

In early 1931, a Chinese man living in the province of Phu Tho wrote to police in Saigon, asking them to send someone to investigate the murder of his wife. Phu Tho is a province where the Red River delta meets the northern mountains, some 80 kilometres from Hanoi. Eventually, a French official arrived and found a case which was far from simple. The murdered woman apparently had been involved in opium smuggling, with some assistance from her husband. That suggested an easy explanation for her murder. The complication resulted from the fact that the rival smugglers in the province were members of the “brigade spéciale” against smuggling. Government officials, both French and Vietnamese, including the local head of the anti-smuggling police, appeared to have been actively engaged in smuggling or taking bribes from smugglers.²⁴ Corruption was rife in the French colonial government of Phu Tho.

The investigation ballooned beyond its original focus on the murder of a Chinese woman, resulting in nearly 700 pages of depositions from an array of officials, local merchants, and other important figures in the province. Pinning the corruption on any one person, or small group of people, proved impossible. The 300-page report filed suggested that the whole system of government-permitted opium smoking inevitably led to corruption. One problem stemmed from the efforts of the government opium monopoly to discourage opium smoking by limiting the number of places where people could smoke. The report noted that this restriction meant many people lived far from the nearest opium shop, and those people naturally were likely to purchase their opium illicitly, closer to home. The biggest problem, however, was how the anti-smuggling service operated, with the reward structure for both agents and the service as a whole not tied to successful seizures of valuable amounts of smuggled goods, but rather to the number of successful investigations, whatever the value or quantity of illicit goods seized. This system discouraged honest investigators, such that the report noted bluntly, “if the Service was comprised of honest agents, the results would certainly be different.”²⁵

The author, who was Inspector General, had some suggestions, including more modern equipment for the anti-smuggling service, a system of rewarding the agency based on the value of its seizures, and higher levels of compensation for agents in the field as opposed to those who remained in headquarters.

24 Nouveau Fonds (hereafter NF), Indochine, Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (hereafter CAOM), file 866, Rapport à le Gouverneur Général au sujet de la contrebande d’opium dans la vallée du Fleuve Rouge et du Rôle de la Brigade Spéciale de l’opium by the Inspecteur Général du Travail, 10 juin 1931.

25 Ibid., Rapport à le Gouverneur Général au sujet de la contrebande d’opium, 10 June 1931.

But he said the only real solution for the opium smuggling problem was to move toward complete abolition of legal opium consumption, as efforts at the League of Nations promoted.²⁶ Given the levels of illicit opium consumption already in the province, he surely did not expect prohibition to end smoking. It might, however, make official corruption riskier and therefore less tempting.

Government monopolies over opium imports and distribution seemingly enhanced opportunities for the spread of official corruption. The inspector general's suggestion to end legal opium consumption would have removed many opportunities, but he realized that policy change was unlikely. His other suggestions, more likely to be adopted, involved providing more resources to government officials. These resources gave the colonial regime a greater chance of achieving its goals of observing and reforming opium consumption, and simultaneously opened the government to more criticism if corruption continued or consumption remained high.

Control and State Capacity

Recent scholarship on imperialism has emphasized the power of imperial states to intrude on, observe, regulate, and order some of the most personal and intimate aspects of people's lives. State capacity, and officials' interest in using that capacity, grew in undeniable ways in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Technologies of surveillance, classification, and tracking improved dramatically.²⁷ Ideologies about the purpose of government also justified this increased intrusion. Colonialism was supposed to improve, or civilize, its subjects. To have a chance of doing so, colonial governments commanded change in personal habits and behaviours. The cumulative impression this scholarship gives is of a colonial state which is powerful and intrusive. It is a compelling and persuasive image. But these colonial states also ventured into areas, such as opium regulation, which taxed their ability to achieve even their most basic goals. The inability to stop smuggling, illicit consumption, and corruption suggested that the power of the colonial state could not reform people's personal behaviours. These failures also suggested that governments did not control their own officials, nor even the borders of their territories. Colonial governments ambitious to impose their own vision of civilization in Southeast Asia were thwarted by the ineffectiveness of the powers available to them.

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26 Ibid., Rapport à le Gouverneur Général au sujet de la contrebande d'opium, 10 June 1931.

27 Alfred W. McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 33–45.

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